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ABSTRACT

Alchemy is the magical or mysterious power or process involving chemistry, magic, and philosophy in transforming one thing into another. The term is often used to describe the medieval study that sought to transform cheaper metals into gold or silver. "Educational alchemy" is the process by which schools are converted into more effective learning environments. This paper presents a school-transformation formula that synthesizes theoretical contributions from professional literature and practical applications from personal experience as they relate to the following aspects of learning environments: vision, mission, data collection, goals, culture, change, and empowerment. The transformation formula is based on 20 years of school leadership at the elementary, middle, and high school levels in a variety of socioeconomic and racial settings. (Contains 63 endnotes.) (LMI)

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Educational Alchemy:
The Transformation of Schools

Presented by
Michael James Mugits

at the
National Conference on Creating the Quality School
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 1997

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Educational Alchemy

The World Book dictionary provides the following figurative definition of the word "alchemy."

> "A magical or mysterious power or process of transforming one thing into another."[1]

The term is often used to explain the process studied during the Middle Ages that combined chemistry, magic, and philosophy, in an attempt to find or prepare a substance which turned cheaper metals into gold or silver.

What does this have to do with school improvement?

Many public schools are currently involved in a similar quest for a conversion formula to transform themselves into effective schools. This improvement process also involves chemistry, magic, and philosophy. However, the performance record on school transformation may not be much better than that of metal transformation.

Twenty years as a public school leader in environments as varied as a high minority, low socio-economic, urban junior high in the Southwest; an affluent, Anglo, suburban high school in the Rockies; and a rural elementary school experiencing rapidly changing demographics in New England; have afforded me a unique perspective on the issues and problems confronting schools.

The format of this presentation focuses on the following components; vision, mission, data base, goals, culture, change, and empowerment. Along the way you will receive information from a variety of resources, conventional and non-conventional, through the use of practical examples, stories, quotes, interviews, research, illustrations, and much more. The foundation of this address emerges from an actual metamorphosis - the conversion of an urban junior high plagued by the social ills of crime and drugs into a distinguished school later described by one of it's learners as "a school of hope."

One of my hobbies is magic, hence the reference to alchemy. Magic is an intriguing subject. It also looks good on your resume, particularly when more and more school leaders are expected to perform "magic" on the job. I regularly employ magic in workshops on school improvement. All of us, at one time or another have been held spellbound by a magician. Early in my career I was curious enough, following an entertaining show, to seek additional information on magic.

This interest led me to a purchase at a store specializing in magic. As soon as I bought the trick the proprietor demonstrated it to me. Needless to say, I was disappointed at how easy it was to perform the sleight of hand. What at one time appeared so amazing was surprisingly

simple when the process was slowed down and reduced to discrete parts that revealed the "magic."

Magic and school improvement are similar in that respect. Once someone exhibits the proper steps the "trick" becomes much more understandable and attainable than previously imagined. Here we go.

Vision

"The best way to predict the future is to invent it."[2]

Alan Kay

One of the featured components of discussions on school improvement is "vision." What is a vision? Why do people talk about vision? Where, and how, do you get a vision?

The following story is from "Bert and I,"[3] a comical record of Down East Maine humor by Robert Bryan and Marshall Dodge. It is an example of how a school operates when it lacks a crystallized vision for members of it's community.

***

It seems that Bert and his partner were out in their boat in quest for lobster. A dense fog rolled in and enveloped their craft. Their meager lobster business left them without the technology they needed during such a dilemma. There was no fathometer to determine the depth of the water so they could not tell when they were approaching land. There was no radar to detect their surroundings. They were a floating navigational hazard.

Bert was worried about running aground and crashing. He went to the bow of the vessel and reached into a sack of potatoes. He threw a potato straight into the fog as far as he could and then cupped his hands to his ears. If he heard a splash he directed his shipmate to maintain the course. If

he didn't hear a splash he quickly yelled "Right!" or "Left!" depending on his best guess.

***

Do you know a school with the same sense of direction, proceeding in a fog without anything to guide their efforts? An entire staff relying on the arm strength of the school leader throwing potatoes and anxiously awaiting orders to sharply veer left or right at a moments notice?

Make sure that the members of the school community where you work are pursuing a common path toward an accepted vision instead of participating in a parade of the blind leading the blind.

A vision is an imagined and desired state. It is timeless rather than finite and terminal. Like the stars that guided ancient mariners, perhaps we will never reach them but we can certainly plot our course by them. A vision is an ideal that is constantly modified to meet changes and improvements in what we know about excellence in the teaching and learning process. In their work "Creating Excellence" authors Hickman and Silva describe vision as " a journey from the known to the unknown, creating the future from a montage of facts, figures, hopes, dreams, dangers, and opportunities."[4]

A vision should serve as a beacon for the school community. The meaning and direction expressed in the vision

provides a mental image of what "could be, and should be." Hockey great Wayne Gretzky, when explaining how he has scored more goals than anyone in the history of the sport, states that, "It's more important to know where the puck *will be* than to know where the puck *is*."[5] This guide will then function as a filter that screens actions and decisions of the school by way of asking, "Does this facilitate the pursuit of the vision?"

A vision is captivating and motivating. Peter Senge, author of *The Fifth Discipline*, suggests that what the vision does is perhaps even more significant than what it is.[6] For instance, the late Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech is a classic example of communicating a vision. When King delivered his famous address to over two hundred thousand people in Washington, D.C. the civil rights movement was galvanized.

A review of King's presentation yields several essential ingredients for articulating a vision. King utilized repetition, imagery, and metaphors, in an emotional appeal to the central values and beliefs of his audience. The message was enduring, motivational, credible, energizing, and most of all, it was right. King presented followers with a more attractive future in such a fashion that they enlisted in the crusade toward that day "When we let freedom ring."[7] A believable, fair, and inviting vision,

effectively and passionately communicated, will tug on the heartstrings of followers with the strength of the most enthusiastic bell ringer.

School leaders must construct a representation of a desired state of being for the school community. This picture must be inspiring enough to enlist the commitment of followers to expend the energy and effort necessary to breathe life into the vision. As an example of such a challenge, John Sculley, in his book *Odyssey*, shares the recruiting pitch made to him by Steve Jobs, then in charge of Apple Computer; "Do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water or do you want a chance to change the world?"[8]

Contrast this with the beacon that guides many schools today. The accountability movement is so oriented toward test scores that the accepted "vision" of schools is simply the clarion to "raise the tests scores" or "let's have scores higher than school district X." This goal hardly serves as a vision worthy of the sacrifices of valuable time and sincere effort required by those involved. Where is the personal conviction? the emotion? the appeal to the follower's inner feelings? And we wonder about detached constituents in and out of the school.

In an effort to craft a vision the school leader should examine the institutional history of the school for

important artifacts, heroes, and legends. These symbols can be assimilated into the fabric of the vision to create context and meaning. Assuming a variety of perspectives generates multiple possibilities for the school's future. Scanning the internal and external environment for input provides added ingredients for the vision.

The vision should emerge naturally without force or thrust. It is not something to be done to people, rather it is experienced with people. Rinaldo S. Brutoco explained it in his foreword to *The New Paradigm in Business* when he referred to the work of Michelangelo. "When asked how he could so miraculously carve warm, emotion laden human forms from cold, lifeless marble, the sculptor responded that he never carved anything *in* marble. Rather, he revealed, his technique was to merely "chip away" the excess marble from the form already within the marble, so it could be freed. His task was to liberate the form *from* the marble, not to carve his abstract concepts into it."[9]

Developing a vision is similar to the task of an architect designing a blueprint for the school. The architect is capable of looking beyond an empty plot of land and envisioning a completed building of form and function. Instead of a visible, concrete structure the school leader is creating a conceptual framework; a blueprint for "social architecture."[10]

In order for the vision to work it must be clear to everyone and applicable to all members of the school staff. Everyone must feel some sense of involvement and participation, responsibility and accountability. The school leader should communicate the vision in a "stump speech" whenever appropriate at gatherings. The vision must be conveyed in a manner that each listener leaves the function with a clear understanding of the vision.

For purposes of illustration, think of a photograph. Imagine that you took a picture of the vision and you cut it into pieces and distributed it so each person held a portion of the vision in their hand. At the conclusion of the stump speech you would have a group of people with such a small perspective on the vision that they could never understand the whole picture.

Contrast this with a hologram,[11] the three dimensional image created by a laser beam. If you could develop a hologram of the vision and then divide it into pieces each part contains the whole image intact rather than reflecting fragments of the original. No matter how many times you divide the hologram each part of the beam reveals the entire image. Communicate the vision like a hologram so each member of your audience departs that stump speech fully comprehending the vision and inspired to share it with others.

Staff members must have the ability and responsibility to make the vision happen. Feedback and reward systems should reinforce the vision. Consistency becomes paramount. In his landmark book, *A Place Called School*, author John Goodlad laments the discrepancy that exists when a school boasts a goal that proves to be in opposition to common practice within the school. He refers to a school that states in a written document listing goals it's intent to "develop independent learners" while teachers in the same school willingly accept reports from students with content copied directly from a book.[12] The disparity of what we say and what we do resurrects Longfellow's "What you do thunders so that I can not hear what you say."[13] The school leaders must live and preach the vision in a sincere and visible fashion each and every day.

Mission

"It will not be one man going to the moon,
but an entire nation."[14]
JFK

John Henry Fabre, a French scientist, studied processionary caterpillars, so named because when they travel they form a single line and follow each other.[15] Fabre conceived of an experiment to examine their behavior. He placed caterpillars end to end to form a complete circle around the lip of a plate and then placed the caterpillar's primary source of food in the middle of the plate.

Then he watched them. The caterpillars went around and around and around. Minutes turned into hours and hours stretched to days. Finally, after several days, the caterpillars died of exhaustion and starvation.. They had circled the plate endlessly while their sustenance was inches away. They clearly had no mission other than following the caterpillar in front of them.

Too many schools either lack a mission or have a lengthy, ambiguous, noble sounding, dust covered statement that nobody can seem to remember. Absent a mission, these schools are comprised of valuable and well intended staff members who extend themselves in an uncoordinated manner that approximates entropy. David Osborne and Ted Gaebler,

authors of *Reinventing Government*, provide a sad commentary that describes the plight of organizations that are not oriented around a mission: "Most public organizations are driven not by their missions, but by rules and budgets. The glue that holds public bureaucracies together, in other words, is like epoxy; it comes in two separate tubes. One holds rules, the other line items. Mix them together and you get cement."[16]

A mission should be a short statement that embodies what your school is really about. You should be able to articulate it in one breath. Anything longer will decrease the retention of the statement and thereby minimize the number of people who will remember it, communicate it, and live it.

The mission distinguishes you from other schools. It emphasizes your purpose and sustains it for an indefinite period of time. It brings clarity to your parameters and scope. It reflects values, beliefs and provides guidance for behavior within the organization. It speaks to your goal or product. And finally, it is difficult to create.

Let's look at what we're all about. Effective schools researcher Larry Lezotte points to three types of missions that typically motivate schools.[17] Schools are expected to simultaneously respond to different origins of public pressure. One, to provide custodial care. If you ever wonder

about this listen to all of the complaints anytime your school closes for inclement weather, staff development,... parents wail about their need for sudden child care services! Two, to render society a process of sorting and selecting among students, who goes to college, who doesn't,... Three, the altruistic function of teaching and learning, providing opportunities for all learners to realize their true potential,...

How is your school different than any other school. There are public schools, private schools, religious schools, prep schools, home schools, charter schools, magnet schools, not to mention the various types of schools ranging from charm schools and beauty schools to obedience schools. Check the telephone book listing for schools and you'll find the full spectrum of offerings. But what does your school "do?" Ask around in the immediate community. Ask local realtors, they're often the initial contact newcomers have regarding information on your school when they relocate to your area. Ask the waitress at the local coffee shop. Ask a random sampling of people on the street. What will you find? Will anyone shape their response around the basis of teaching and learning?

A mission is not a goal. Don't confuse it with a plan to "increase the percentage of learners who perform above the mastery level on the state test." It is not something

that you may reduce to discrete and quantifiable parts. An excellent example can be found in Charles Garfield's *Peak Performers.*[18]

Garfield worked in the aerospace industry at Grumman International. During his initial work there every indicator of morale was negative. Absenteeism was high. Quality and pride were lacking. Grievances were frequently registered. Workers appeared to be going through the motions in performing their tasks. They had jobs but not opportunities.

Garfield left for a while and eventually returned to Grumman. Upon his return, he was amazed to find a total reversal in morale during his brief absence. The environment and expectations were unchanged. The laborers were replicating their same old responsibilities. The union contract remained as it was. The only change introduced was the awarding of the government contract on constructing the Lunar Exploration Module that the first visitors to the moon would use for transportation on the lunar surface.

No longer were the workers exercising mundane tasks, fastening bolts, tightening nuts... They were now involved in a significant aspect of the space race. In their hands rested the safety of men about to make history hundreds of thousands of miles away. Suddenly, each employee had a greater purpose.

Grumman had a picture of the moon enlarged and placed in a prominent location as a reminder of their mission. A prototype of the LEM was displayed in the cafeteria. The workers were frequently reminded of their important role in this historic flight. Finally, a party was held to celebrate the point at which the astronauts were televised riding the LEM.

Although the morale was raised as rapidly as the ascent of the Apollo rocket it descended just as quickly upon the return of the sojourners to earth. Sadly, the workers were back to merely fastening bolts, tightening nuts... Their purpose was framed within a terminal time frame. Once they accomplished their "mission" everything went back to normal. They were less inspired, less motivated, and less involved with an uplifting venture.

It is vital to define your mission in terms that can be sustained over time. For example, "Develop productive, life long learners" is a mission that is believable, credible, worthy, purposeful, and lasting. It may not fit attractively on some chart in the district office but it succinctly expresses the resolute intentions of every school staff member.

The primary function of the mission is to clearly and publicly articulate the organization's reason for being. Once established and understood, the mission becomes a

source of clarification. The mission represents a compass point of reference and direction. Staff members have reasonable expectations and parameters that guide work behaviors. Actions either support or inhibit the pursuit of the mission. The statement engenders both individual and organizational accountability throughout the school in terms of development and application of policies and procedures. Consistency extends far beyond executive lip service.

The aim of the mission is to assert the critical attribute of the organization, the single driving force propelling the energy of the school staff. If the mission isn't expressed in terms of teaching and learning then you're in the wrong business.

Look beyond the obvious. For instance, it would be simple and quick to assume that because we work at a school our mission would take the shape of - "graduating all students." In *Making It Work*, author Alan Weiss explained how sales of Kodak film increased significantly when Kodak comprehended what they were really selling.[19] Consumers generally purchased film for weddings, anniversaries, vacation excursions, birthdays,... In other words, people were buying memories, not film. The thrust of their advertising campaign shifted toward selling memories rather than film. That switch spoke volumes regarding purpose and inspiration. Similarly, aren't we seeking to extend beyond

"graduating all students" and reach a higher calling with a more lasting impact?

The process of arriving at a mission that attracts the support of those involved in promoting it is a function of your practice of decision making. People will present their agendas, argue minute points, and debate the nuances of language. However, as a matter of perspective, it is important to note that Lincoln's celebrated Gettysburg address is only ninety six words long and that our country's constitution, following lengthy political debates, was written in only two days. The mission of your school should not consume a considerable amount of time or words!

Finally, a brief story to relate the danger of becoming detached from what should be your organization's source of strength, it's mission.

***

Anteaus was a giant wrestler of Greek myths. He lived alongside a dirt road and compelled all who passed by to engage him in a struggle to the death. His abode was constructed of the bones of his victims and testified to his prowess.

Hercules traveled by one day and was required to accept his challenge. A ferocious battle ensued. Each time Hercules threw Anteaus to the ground the Greek giant recovered and was even stronger. Eventually Hercules theorized that

Anteaus gained his strength from the ground - Mother Earth. Hercules then grabbed his opponent by the throat, lifted him off the source of his strength, and strangled him.[20]

***

Reach an understanding of your mission, gain commitment for it, anchor on it, draw a line in the sand with it, go forth and live it, but do not deviate from it's purpose.

Data Base

"Quality is determined by the customer."[21]

David Osborne and Ted Gaebler

The size of the population of students, together with the frequency that we administer tests and measure everything else, produces an incredible amount of data for schools. We calculate average daily attendance, identify per pupil expenditures, count the number of library books, monitor student grades, figure the ratio of students to computers, and wrestle with who knows what other potential intervening variables.

Pouring through the labyrinth of details to explore hypotheses can drive one to drink. Perhaps that's why there are two thoughts about drunks that come to mind whenever I think about the challenge of examining the myriad data confronting school leaders.

***

One evening as I walked home I was startled to find a man, obviously under the influence of alcohol, down on his hands and knees scouring the ground beneath the glow of a street lamp.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Looking for my keys," he replied. "Will you help me?"

I accepted the invitation out of sympathy and spent the next few minutes searching in the light of the lamp. Finally, out of frustration, I asked the drunk, "Where do you think you dropped your keys?"

"Over there," he said, and pointed to a spot in the darkness thirty yards away.

Exasperated I asked, "Then why are we looking for them here?"

"Because," he said, "There's no light over there!"[22]

***

Robert Waterman, in his book *The Renewal Factor*, summarized a common abuse of data in this statement: "We use data like a drunk uses a street lamp, for support not illumination."[23]

***

In an environment rich and fertile with data we must conscientiously weed out extraneous, bureaucratic intangibles that grow wild with results and instead cultivate appropriate information that yields opportunities. Louis Gerstner, CEO of IBM expressed his view on reforming public education as follows, "To turn our public schools around we need to adopt that legendary Noah principle: No more prizes for predicting rain. Prizes only for building arks."[24] Educators have been consumed with grappling with everything that can be measured in an effort to "predict rain." It's time to invest in building arks.

Thus far we have talked about vision and mission. Now we begin the process of how we expect to get to our desired state. It's not unlike planning a vacation. You can't decide on the means of transportation until you first determine your destination. Using a car won't help if you want to travel from Kansas to Germany.

Collecting data assists in our journey. Appropriate data serves the same purpose as mile markers along the highway of a lengthy trip. It gives you a frame of reference regarding progress toward your goal. These benchmarks are reinforcing reminders of where we are, how far we've gone and how much longer we have to go.

We often appear to exhaust our energy analyzing facts and figures in a journey that parallels the quest for the Holy Grail. Someone once described the misdirected optimist as a person who continues to dig through a large mound of horse manure in search of the pony that must be around somewhere. This pilgrimage to piles of paper serves to placate public skepticism or satiate the appetite of state education officials but may not lead to exposing patterns that will impact our business.

Roy Rowan, author of *The Intuitive Manager*, claims that "Research is more of a confirmation tool than a discovery tool."[25] Peter Drucker echoes this point in *Managing The Non Profit Organization* when he states, "Most of our current

reporting systems don't reveal opportunities, they report problems."[26]

The probe for opportunities starts with a review of the mission of the school. Reiterating what you do and why you do it will guard against organizational deviation. Energy and resources are allocated with respect to the constant frame of reference, the mission. Recognizing our true purpose, we must focus on examining data that can be utilized to facilitate progress toward the vision of our ideal school. Sir George Pickering stated that, "Not everything that counts can be counted," and conversely, "not everything that can be counted counts."[27]

Let's look at one school district's mission as an example. The mission is, "The Amarillo Independent School District will ensure that all individuals become productive, lifelong learners."[28] Clarification not only brings definition to those responsible for pursuing the mission but it also allows for the construction of a viable system of collecting feedback on progress. Each key word should be expanded upon by those developing the mission.

For instance, the school district involved in the sample mission above provided the following explanations: ensure "means intend, promise, do all we possibly can, and to accept responsibility," all individuals refers to "all students, all staff, all community, and all parents,"

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productive is interpreted as "maximum potential of each individual, contribute to society, and being all you can be," lifelong learners are considered "inquisitive, flexible, questioning, always seeking new information, and processors of information."

The school staff, equipped with the philosophical parameters supplied by these definitions, is now in position to create methods and devices for collecting information relevant to the mission.

Selecting the right instruments is the next step. A microscope is too often employed in the analysis of reports and statistics. Some results are very difficult to understand from up close. Immersion can obscure an investigation. Instead we could benefit by exploring distant possibilities and forecasting future opportunities with a telescope. Once we have our target in sight we can view the data through a kaleidoscope that offers ever changing patterns and perspectives. Rowan refers to the practice of kaleidoscopic thinking as, "The ability to see new patterns in old phenomena by taking the existing fragments, twisting them, and coming up with an exciting new view."[29] The intention, as Waterman advises, is to seek "a difference that makes a difference."[30]

Goals

"If you don't know where you're going,
any road will get you there."[31]
The Cheshire Cat in Alice in Wonderland

***

A friend of mine was recently touring the back roads of New England. He is a rifle instructor with an ROTC marksmanship group. As he rounded a curve in the road he was surprised to by the sight of several targets covering the side of a large barn. Each target had a bright red bulls eye. And, smack dab in the center of each bulls eye was a bullet hole.

Curiosity aroused, he pulled in the driveway and made his way to the farmhouse, intent upon receiving advice from the accomplished marksman responsible for all of the bulls eyes. Certainly this information would help his students.

His knock on the door was greeted by an elderly man. Brief introductions revealed that the old man was the sharpshooter. The man accepted my friend's invitation for a demonstration.

Moments later the farmer emerged from the house, grasping a rusty bucket in one hand, and an unimpressive, outdated rifle in the other. The man faced the barn, checked the wind, raised the gun, (though my friend could not see any target) and blasted a shot. Then the elderly man

sauntered over to the barn with his bucket and calmly painted a target around the bullet hole he had left in the side of the barn.

"Works every time!" exclaimed the farmer.[32]

***

This fallacious practice appears successful and is exercised by all too many organizations. Author and business consultant Tom Peters calls it "the Ready, Fire, Aim"[33] strategy. The trouble with this technique is that it seems to work when you consider the finished product. However, this process fails miserably as a plan to meet goals. Leaders indulging followers in such a "pin the tail on the donkey" effort would be irresponsible.

These targets should serve as helmsman in navigating through the choppy and changing waters of the open sea, inextricably linked to the vision, the lighthouse beacon shepherding the ship, and the mission, the harbor of destination.

Now that we have a shared mental picture of the vision, a commitment to the mission, and an appropriate data base, we must establish goals. Identifying relevant and reasonable goals that challenge but stop short of frustrating is an important first step.

In Search of Excellence, by Tom Peters and Robert Waterman, includes a reference to a study conducted

involving individuals entering a room with a stake standing upright, and three rings.[34] Each person was instructed to go into the room and throw the rings onto the stake. That was it. They were not told where to stand. Observers looking through a two way mirror plotted where the individuals stood and the distance from the stake.

They found three distinct groups. One group practically stood over the stake where it would be difficult to miss. Another group located themselves at the opposite end of the room as far away as possible where it would be unrealistic to expect success. The third group was about halfway between the two, far enough away to challenge themselves, but not so close that it would be easy.

This is not dissimilar from the distinctions drawn among learners when pursuing their goal of learning. As educators we understand that there are three general levels of instructional delivery when developing lesson plans for learners; frustrational, instructional, and independent. The frustrational level is a task too difficult for the child to meet with success. The instructional level requires teacher intervention for the learner to experience success with the task. The independent level is one which the learner is able to experience success with the task without direct interaction with the teacher.

Goals facing your school are no different. Progress can not be expected overnight. Follow the advice of whomever suggested that the best way to eat an elephant is "one bite at a time."

Make certain that you begin constructing goals by insuring that they evolve out of your data base and point directly toward your mission and vision. These incremental goals, when linked together like connect the dot exercises, will eventually yield a recognizable and complete picture.

Next, acknowledge that the conditions and environment that exists when you author your goals may very well vacillate and require periodic modifications. In *Peak Performers* Garfield discusses the critical path course correction central to the Apollo flight to the moon.[35] The most efficient or appropriate trajectory to take toward a target is referred to as the critical path. Within this path is room for mistakes and corrections. During the Apollo trek to the moon the capsule was off course ninety percent of the time. However, the astronauts had the ability and control to correct themselves. Those involved with goal attainment must feel the same latitude to practice course correction in order to land on target.

Another point regarding flexibility in creating and pursuing goals is made by Waterman in *The Renewal Factor* when he states that the problem inherent in the plans of

many organization is the "attempt to overlay a rational, linear, deterministic technique called strategy on an underlying process that is random and full of surprises."[36]

Imagine that you are traveling in the vast and empty desert. The barren landscape becomes altered by every breeze that shifts the sand like waves on the ocean. If you plot your direction by landmarks that are subject to the winds and susceptible to change you will be lost. Instead, one must rely on a more constant source of reference for orientation. Just as the sun offers assistance in direction for desert travelers, so does the mission supply an unwavering guide for those involved in goal attainment in your school.

And, continuing with this analogy, it's essential that our journey through the desert includes stops to obtain water at an oasis here and there for refreshment and renewal. Likewise, planning opportunities for short term "wins" along the route of our goals will sustain and reaffirm continued efforts.

Culture

"We make our house and then our house makes us."[37]

Winston Churchill

Terry Deal and Allen Kennedy, authors of the groundbreaking effort *Corporate Cultures*, define culture simply as, "the way we do things around here."[38] Furthermore, they contend that the beliefs of a culture are primarily shaped by what people perceive it takes to get ahead.

Perception plays a major role in understanding culture and it's impact on the organization. One of the keys to introducing and experiencing successful change efforts hinges on the ability to adroitly maneuver the nuances of culture. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the school leader to monitor the pulse of the culture and orchestrate the necessary social architecture to produce a positive and constructive culture.

The instrumental components of culture identified by Deal and Kennedy include the business of the environment, values, heroes, rites and rituals, and the cultural network. These elements are conveyed in many different ways. Communication, formal and informal, verbal and non-verbal, represents a significant determinant in shaping company

culture. The following story demonstrates the value of communication, specifically, the subtlety of language.

***

A long time staff member was retiring. I was elected to purchase the gift that our department was going to present to him. Knowing he was an avid sailor, I decided to buy him something related to sailing. A sextant, to navigate by the stars, would be just the thing for this ancient mariner.

I realized that our collection of donations was insufficient shortly after I entered the upscale sailing shop. So, intent on finding him a sextant, I traveled to a large department store.

I asked the woman at the sporting goods counter if the store had any sextants. She curled her lip, stared at me and unleashed her reply. I was unprepared for her sharp retort.

"Young man, we have pup tents, mountain tents, dome tents, and canopy tents, but not any sex tents! What you do in them after you buy them is your own business!"[39]

***

Language is central to communication. The words we choose reflect values within the school culture. There are buzz words, antiquated words, technical words, esoteric words, words that hold sacred significance within the school, words that signal red flags, and many others that reveal something about the person wielding the words.

The frequency of the words and phrases reflect meaning. Perhaps it's a word that the superintendent begins to sprinkle about in conversations with hopes it will later spread to the faculty lounge. Maybe it's a word that those in authority appear to avoid using. The choices we make in expressing ourselves are revealing.

An extension of this can be found in the tales and legends transmitted by veterans to the less experienced staff members. The authors of *Change and Effectiveness in Schools*, contend that two critical aspects of a school's culture are related to the distribution of knowledge about norms and the extent of conformity to them.[40] Waterman supports this assertion by stating, "Procedure manuals might have rules, but stories have morals. The latter tend to influence thinking and action more than the former.[41]

Let's look at the post office for an example. Assume that the culture of the postal service revolves around diligently adhering to the creed of delivering mail, "despite rain, snow, sleet, or hail,..." Legends emerge from stories repeated over and over about how Charlie braved ten foot drifts of snow to make sure that the people on his route received their Christmas cards properly delivered by the post office. The scope of these stories often mirrors the values of the dominant group within the organization and has the potential to shape the development of others.

For instance, if the general attitude within the school is negative and morale is low, then people may comment about how "old Fred is so crafty he always beats the system with his sick and personal days." Conversely, if the climate is one which is positive and uplifting, the legend of how "that Mary sure is something, it seems like she never misses a day!" serves as an example and guide for behavior.

Another manner in which a school communicates what it believes to be important can be found by examining available artifacts. Walk through the school where you work as if you've never been there before and note what you see on the bulletin boards and hallway walls. What is featured in the most prominent locations of the school? What appears to be absent from possible display? Interpret the meaning of these symbols as an anthropologist or archeologist would study cultural artifacts for clues of a society.

On an individual level you can analyze your appointment calendar as a reflection of how you use your most valuable commodity, time. The way you spend time emits signals to those in the school community concerning value and importance. This is one method that followers use to determine what is regarded as significant and points to another cultural feature identified by Deal and Kennedy; "what it takes to get ahead around here."[42]

As a leader it behooves you to develop and enhance the values and meaning that support the direction the organization must take to realize it's vision. Recognize and reward desired behaviors among individuals. Acknowledge mentors as heroes. Breed success. Create and sustain rituals and ceremonies that make the vision more comprehensible. Orchestrating these social and psychological variables is an essential responsibility.

Change

"Nobody likes change,
except babies with dirty diapers."[43]
Anonymous

At this point in our discussion, and at this stage in your school improvement process, you have imagined a vision, anchored on a mission, constructed an appropriate data base, identified goals that stretch, and shaped a supportive culture. But now it's apparent that change must occur if we expect to meet with success.

Change will occur whether you want it or not. Attempts to prevent change are as futile as the effort long ago of Canute, the Danish king who sought to demonstrate his power by commanding ocean waves to stop.[44] We can heed the advice of two very different wise men. The ancient sage, Heraclitus, who stated that "It is not possible to step twice in the same river."[45] or cowboy philosopher Will Rogers who claimed that "Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there."[46] Once you accept the inevitability of change you can begin preparing for it by observing several precepts that form a foundation for change.

Change should be evolutionary rather than revolutionary. Changes should emerge convincingly from needs

and interests, occur over time at a pace that approximates the ability of people to adjust to the change, and adapt to internal and external variables that serve to shape the scope and degree of change.

Change should be fluid and persistent like water that seeks it's own level. Contrast the tremendous surge of force found in the wall of water in a flash flood that scatters large rocks, with the tenacious and persevering trickle of water that gradually seeps into the cracks of rocks, expands when frozen, and breaks those same large rocks. One power is visibly relentless and disperses boulders like litter over the terrain, leaving a tumultuous wake forever changed. The other power, more subtle in it's technique, evokes change without violently displacing the rocks.

Despite well intentioned, systematically developed templates of change, with complex flow charts, thoughtfully designed spans of control, appropriate time lines, and analytical processes, … the nature of change tends to be organic, dynamic, and somewhat unpredictable. It is a process not an event. Tom Peters declares in *Thriving on Chaos* that "Most quality programs fail for two reasons; they have system without passion, or passion without system. You must have both."[47] This tenet holds worthy advice for change agents too.

I have initiated and facilitated successful transformations at different schools. There is no sure fire recipe. Change can not be replicated in a cookie cutter pattern. In many cases the ingredients are similar but the amounts vary according to availability and the unique tastes of the consumers, the cooking time is a function of your equipment, and the finished product is often a reflection of your culinary skills. Oh, there's a lot of clean up afterward too!

George Bernard Shaw was quoted as saying, "Reformers have the idea that change can be achieved by brute sanity."[48] Exercise sensitivity and responsiveness with the same diligence you have previously practiced rational strategies. Change is inclined to be more psychological than logical. Never overlook the intangible human factors. Successful change is made by individuals first, then by institutions. Attend to the people before you devote energies to the end product of the change. Adopt the perspective of those who will be affected by the proposed change, their feelings, their attitudes, and their history. Change is a personal experience.

Medical research reveals that patients who are cautioned in detail about the agony and after effects of surgery prior to their operation recover in one third of the time of those patients entering surgery less informed.[49]

And, make no mistake about it, there can be pain in change. Recognizing that will explain why few volunteer for most change programs. Although most people have at one time or another complained about "the way things are," in their organization, they are more likely to want these *things* to be different than they are to *change themselves.*

Clearly articulate the reasons for, and purpose of, the change. Understand differences among satisfiers and motivators. Appeal to values. Invite participation. Monitor progress. Model behavior. Keep in tune with the culture of the organization. Provide feedback and encouragement. Manage meaning and symbols.

Peter Senge, author of *The Fifth Discipline*, asserts that people are more accepting of *change* than they are of *being changed.*[50] Unfortunately, as Michael Ray and Alan Rinzler point out in *The New Paradigm in Business*, the typical process has the cart before the horse: "changes in structure are often made before changes in mind."[51]

Perhaps the best advice to those responsible for change is the Golden Rule of treating people the way you want to be treated. Finally, as you embark on initiating change, accepting the challenge offered agents in Mission Impossible, "Your mission, if you chose to accept it,…" remember the words of Alan Weiss in *Making it Work*, "Who

Grade 4

ever heard of moving in any direction when the first question we all ask is 'How can I cover my rear end'."[52]

Empowerment

"You develop people not jobs."[53]

Peter Drucker

"Before you can ask someone to do something, you have to help them be something."[54]

William Pollard

When I think of empowerment I often conjure up an image of a car. Properly utilized, empowerment can be a vehicle supportive of school improvement. However, the reason I use the car as a symbol of empowerment is embodied in the following two questions associated with cars and reinforcing of empowerment.

First, ask yourself this question, "When was the last time you washed a rental car?"[55]

Second, Carl Petersen, while CEO at Ford, urged design engineers to create the next great concept car by reviewing their plans and offering the challenging question, "Is this the car you want to see in your driveway?"[56]

We don't typically wash rental cars because we only use them a short period of time before returning them to the dealer. Quite simply, they aren't ours.

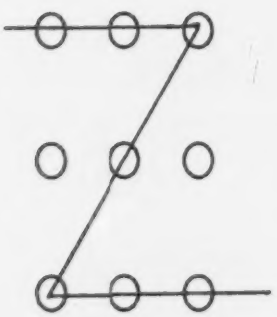
As school leaders we have to find ways to help all staff members feel ownership in the school. The moment that staff members view the school in the same manner they see rental cars then we have lost quality contributions and commitment.

We must position the staff in a fashion that they work with children with the same pride and vigor that the design engineers create the car for their own driveway. In other words, perform their responsibilities as if their very own children were the recipient of their services.

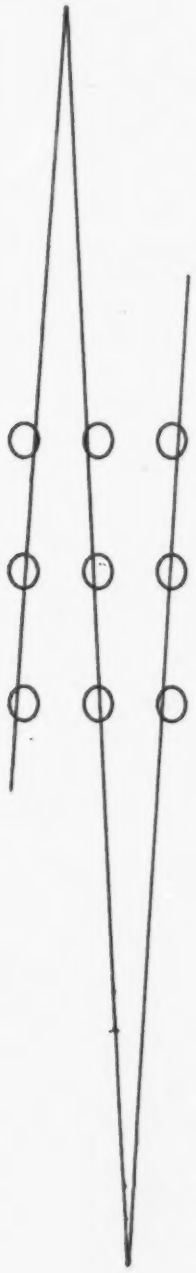
Let's attempt an exercise to obtain further support for extending decision making beyond the confines of the superintendent's office or the principal's office.

Here are your instructions. Connect all nine dots using three straight lines that are themselves connected.

Most people generally form a "Z" or "N" pattern to connect the dots. Unfortunately, this only links seven of the dots. Imagine the dots representing children in a school.



Although such a rate of success often causes a school to be considered "good" the school is not truly excellent unless it connects with all the children or, in this example, all the dots.



The proper solution requires one to go outside of the box, or the confinement of conventional wisdom. The instructions did not prohibit you from using all of the paper. People tend to limit themselves to the square area formed by the dots. Similarly, people may unconsciously limit themselves when it comes to decision making. By empowering others and accessing their contributions we become stronger not weaker.

The days of the great leader are gone. The time when employees acquiesced to the employer simply because of relative standing in the organizational hierarchy has passed. Titular respect, blind faith in the company, and subservient compliance are similarly anachronistic. The waves of change that have swept away the mechanical, bureaucratic, efficiency oriented, scientific theory of management have seeped into one of the bastions of change, the school.

Site based management, win-win negotiations, shared decision making, and active staff participation have entered the gates of the school yard. Empowerment, perhaps the buzzword of the nineties, has either gained internal acceptance in school or been externally mandated upon the school. No matter, the benefits of empowerment are plenty.

However, the shift in decision making has often been challenging.

Let's consider, for an analogy, the introduction and spread of another concept in education. Cooperative learning, embraced by many schools as a means of enacting the adage, "The sum of the parts is greater than the whole," has found acceptance as a pedagogical practice. The theory behind cooperative learning contends that the multiple perspectives and contributions of a small, heterogeneous mix of learners focusing on a common task will yield insights and products that exceed the ability of an individual. Learning evolves from the enriched insight available from a variety of people with vested interests in the result. Commitment is engendered through participation in crafting outcomes. Success is shared with all contributors.

Granted, there is a much more thorough explanation of cooperative learning. Also, the effective implementation of cooperative learning requires training children in the various roles and responsibilities upon which the concept is founded.

The goal here is to demonstrate that while school systems are fairly quick to adopt the practice in the classroom they are often loath to extend the same concept on an adult level by incorporating staff members in cooperative learning opportunities such as shared decision making.

Training is essential for success in shared decision making. While a teacher responds to a multitude of questions that solicit decisions every day their existence in isolated, single cell classrooms does not afford them much opportunity to work cooperatively with their colleagues. Lieberman and Miller expound on this in *Teachers, Their World and Their Work.*[57] It therefore does not hold that simply gathering teachers together in hopes of resolving an issue or attacking a problem will produce quality responses.

Ron Zemke and Dick Schaaf, authors of *The Service Edge,* refer to the power tools of empowerment.[58] These tools are information (data, technical knowledge, political intelligence, and expertise), resources (funds, material, space, time), and support (endorsement, backing, approval, legitimacy). Effective team members should receive training with these three empower tools before engaging in shared decision making.

Time for another test. This exercise, extracted from a study referenced in Rowan's *The Intuitive Manager,* will seek to illustrate why we should expand the base of involvement among staff members.[59] First, two quotes that address the issue.

"Who the Hell wants to hear actors talk."[60] Harry Warner, head of Warner brothers Studio, 1927.

"I figure there's a world wide market for maybe four or five computers."[61] Thomas Watson Sr. CEO of IBM, 1943.

Although both of these men were highly successful leaders of their respective organizations their comments about talking movies and computers were off the mark. It only shows that we are each capable of overlooking important concepts despite a high level of expertise in our field.

Now the test. Instructions: Match the invention with the occupation of the inventor.

Kodachrome	Dye Maker
Pneumatic Tire	Cork Salesman
Automatic Dialing System	Bookkeeper
Detergents	Musician
Continuous Cast Steel	Veterinarian
Safety Razor	Undertaker
Kodak Film	Watchmaker

"An analysis of 58 major twentieth century inventions, (defined in terms of a normal person's frequency of interaction with the product) from chemicals to computers to ball point pens, reveals that in 46 of those discoveries the inventor was an individual, a small firm, or somebody in the 'wrong business.'

King Gillette, the inventor of the safety razor, was a cork salesman. George Eastman, when he revolutionized photography, was a bookkeeper, while a couple of musicians

invented Kodachrome. John Dunlop, co-inventor of the pneumatic tire, was a veterinarian. The automatic dialing system was invented by an undertaker, and a watchmaker trying to solve a brass fitting problem came up with continuous cast steel. The soap makers ignored detergents and the dye makers invented them instead."[62]

Practice

As soon as I had returned the phone to it's cradle and ended my conversation I was gripped by fear. I had paced the floors of my home into the evening hours waiting and hoping for the call. It was the time of summer that personnel decisions were made. I expected the ringing to signal the announcement that I was selected to be the new director of elementary education for the public schools of an urban district in Texas. Instead of receiving a promotion from my elementary principal position, I was shocked to hear that I was being asked by the interim superintendent to become the next principal of Horace Mann Junior High School.

The news was confusing because I wasn't even aware that there was an opening at the school. More out of bewilderment than logic, I readily accepted the change and the challenge.

I recovered enough to make several quick phone calls to other principals seeking information on the school. The size of the district, (thirty three elementary schools, eight junior high schools, four high schools, and two alternative schools), prevented me from having a depth of knowledge about Horace Mann Junior High. Each conversation ended with condolences rather than congratulations. The gravity of the situation soon began to engulf me.

Further inquiries convinced me that the school was in terrible condition. Every form of measurement revealed negative statistics. Attendance was depressed, morale was dispirited, staff transfer requests had piled up, turnover was high, and discipline problems (a total of 525 days of suspensions for drugs, weapons,… for a student body of approximately 600 during the just completed school year) were enormous. Apathy and pessimism covered the school like paint on walls.

I sank into a comfortable chair, sat still for a long time, and stared into nowhere before seeking refuge in sleep. I didn't share the news with my wife. Too much undigested data. I had to chew on everything first.

The tossing and turning abruptly ended when I quietly exited the bed and tip toed out to the living room. It was 4:00 am. I grabbed a pencil and something to write on and began jotting down thoughts, words, ideas, and figures. The scribbling went on for over thirty minutes. When I was finished, I had the blueprint for what was to become a school of hope, a school where I would want to go if I was a junior high student, a school where I wouldn't mind sending my own two children, a school where I would be proud to work as a staff member.

That manifesto, pencil scratches on the back of some envelope I had picked up in the middle of the night,

contained the outline for a far better Horace Mann Junior High School. Eventually, the critical attributes of that initial proposal would be publicized in a brochure of our school.

The pamphlet pointed out the characteristics of the school from A-Z. It featured the foundation for the school, a two word, one breath mission - Aim HIGH; it continued with an explanation of the formula for success, the 4 A's: Attitude + Attendance + Achievement = Acceptance. Copies of the brochures were distributed at our Open House as well as the elementary schools that provided children to Mann.

Ceremonies like academic pep assemblies featuring learning cheers, raps pushing the 4 A's, and trophies for each category of the 4 A's; stories developed around the creation of heroes among the current learner population and the recognition of legends emerging from an analysis of the school's history; symbol management promoting values using the Gold Card, the Totem Pole, placemats, school stationery, rubber stamps, business cards for all employees; and much more helped fuel our progress.

As the leader of the school I assumed the responsibility for creating the vision. I had to sincerely and deeply believe in the concept if I expected to share it with others and enlist them in following along. I had to be able to submerge myself in it, feel it, see it, and touch

it, if I wanted to convince people that the trip would be worth the cost.

And, understand, there is a cost. Considerable time, effort, energy, and resources would have to be committed toward the transformation of the building into a real school.

That same morning, I went into the elementary school I had been working and announced to the only staff present, the twelve month employees, that I was switching to Horace Mann. After the awkward congratulations and good luck wishes I was approached by the head custodian. He stood reverently and stated that the entire custodial crew of the school had requested that he ask if they could follow me to Horace Mann. I had always gotten along with the crew and respected their work. I think they respected me because my father was also a custodian. Although their support and commitment was appreciated I couldn't answer them without pointing out the huge task ahead. My description didn't alter their interest. I told them I'd see what I could do.

My initial visit of Horace Mann was alarming. The front entrance sat atop a concrete porch that was stained by the repeated disposal of wax stripper that was obviously the work of some uncaring, inattentive custodian. A small window above the door was cracked and wore bright red book tape as a hasty and insufficient band aid. There was a bullet hole

in another window pane. I hesitantly opened the main door. It was dark. I flipped on the nearby light switch. The dimness that greeted me was attributed to the fact that the light globe was half full of dead flies and moths. Still, after some effort we were able to retrieve the small caliber bullet responsible for the hole in the window. I retained it for a momento.

The very next thing that caught me eye was the dusty display cases that flanked the foyer entrance. The cases were full of athletic trophies boasting of the prowess of various teams. My stare rested upon the deflated football marking the 1934 city championship. I suddenly felt deflated myself.

The rest of the tour revealed a glaring contrast between the dark and dusty, staid and stagnant environment within the school, and the surreal and ephemeral world of the adolescents outside of the school. There were prints of French impressionists lining the library walls above the outdated books that collected more spider webs than sign out cards. There were portraits of former principals hung in a neat row along the main hallway like it was a museum gallery. The woodwork was deep brown, the walls painted a pale, institutional green. It went on and on. It was not inviting.

Within a week the new superintendent began work. I met him on his inaugural review of the realm. He was aghast at the condition of the school. He immediately ordered a change after hearing me relate the transfer request of the custodial crew at the school where I formerly worked. The timing allowed an exploitation of the new superintendent's honeymoon. His gesture of support, perhaps intended to produce some degree of immediate achievement for himself, paid dividends for us. The walls were quickly covered with brighter colors. The building was attended to with sweat and pride.

With the physical plant receiving a makeover it was time to begin renovation of the conceptual infrastructure. I expanded on the envelope outline.

Identifying the Mission

It started with a phone call to a local billboard company. I decided to invest the meager activity account funds in publicizing our mission, "Aim HIGH at Horace Mann Junior High." It took some convincing. The salesman thought it was a joke. He eventually came by and we agreed on four sites within our attendance area. The school was located very close to the center of downtown. His marketing statistics boasted that 27,000 people traveled these busy intersections to and from work each day.

Perhaps nobody could identify the names of all forty seven of the district's public schools but at least many of them would not only know our name but also recite our mission. Most importantly, the more public a mission is the more compelling it is for those charged with the responsibility of pursuing it.

Note: [After the first year success of the school I was contacted by the owner of the billboard company who apologetically informed me that he was a former student of the school. He went on to acknowledge that he had always been embarrassed to admit he went to Horace Mann. And now, after the success of the school, he was not only proud of having attended Mann but also volunteered to donate the use of the billboards the following year, when we added to the mission, "Aim HIGH, **Expect** Success at Horace Mann Junior High."]

The instructional staff arrived for the standard day of staff development prior to the start of school. I was met with body language and facial expressions advertising skepticism and cynicism. I didn't blame them for their reservations. They had experienced an endless string of "new" administrators with hoops to jump through in a pattern of over promising and under delivering. I was brief in my remarks and conscious of avoiding anything that could be misconstrued as condescending or authoritative. Besides,

this was not the crucial moment or the critical arena. That would be tomorrow.

I scheduled an address of the entire school the next day. Every teenager was there, accompanied by their teachers and the non instructional staff as well. I began the delivery slowly and then built it up to a crescendo that touted Aim HIGH and the 4 A's. I started by reminding everyone that the beginning of school coincided with another significant event in Texas, the first football game of the season. I pleaded ignorance and asked which school had the best football team in the city, knowing full well that Horace Mann, smallest of all eight junior high schools, had a tremendous sports history, particularly in football.

"WE DO!!" was the immediate response in boisterous unison.

"Who is number one?" I asked in raised voice.

"WE ARE!!" they shouted back.

"Have you ever seen those football fans on T.V. that hold up their index finger claiming to be number one?"

At once, almost six hundred heads nodded affirmatively.

"Wouldn't it be funny if you saw a fan holding up eight fingers and yelling 'We're number eight!'" I asked.

There was some cautious laughter amid the audience in response to the uncertain course the speech was beginning to take.

"We are number eight!" I shouted at them, pausing a bit for it to sink in. "We're number eight in attendance among all eight junior high schools. We're number eight in achievement among all eight junior high schools. And if discipline reports mean anything, we're number eight in attitude among all eight junior high schools."

That was it. I simply stood there, alone on the stage, and swept the room with a face as serious as I could make.

"I understand that this school is very competitive. That's great, but we need to compete in the classroom. It doesn't help you to score touchdowns against the kids across town if you end up working for them ten years from now. It's time we concentrated on beating them in learning, not just in sports.

"Besides, from what I've read, once the report cards come out and the state's "no pass, no play" rule comes into effect we lose so many athletes to grades that a team of elementary kids can beat you.

"If you plan on winning anything, you need to Aim HIGH!

Communicating the Vision

It was then, with an attentive and embarrassed audience, that I shared a vision for the school. I disclosed my own background of growing up in a family of nine, on welfare, and headed by ninth grade educated parents. In the

ensuing moments I attempted to gain credibility with an audience of brown, yellow, black and white faces that had a common denominator of lacking green - the vast majority were poor enough to qualify for free or reduced lunch.

I knew what it was like to wear hand me down's, to accept free lunch, and to go without what others take for granted. I had overcome many of the same obstacles they faced and worked my way through college and into success and satisfaction. I now pledged to assist them in Aiming HIGH in a quest for success that would lead to acceptance, from others, and, more importantly, from themselves.

I presented the formula for acceptance and clarified each of the major components. These operational definitions were later contained in a brochure that was made available throughout the attendance district, distributed to the media, realtors, and elementary schools that sent learners to Horace Mann, and to area businesses. The same messages were repeated by me in the newspaper, radio and local television interviews that occurred as a result of the success of the school.

Attributes of the Vision

Attendance was not just about coming to school every day, it was about making a difference. Everyone was expected to be involved and actively participate in the various activities supplied at school.

The school district, in an attempt to increase student attendance, and therefore state aid, created a recognition program that rewarded the schools that had the highest percentage daily attendance and the most improved daily attendance. Not only did we win the $500.00 award each semester that first year, we were the only school that thought it appropriate for a student to accept the check on behalf of their school. After all, they were the ones who won the award, not the principal or staff.

The funds were placed in the Student Council account and used to "adopt" one of the elementary schools that sent learners to Mann. The school district had solicited local businesses to adopt schools and provide 'in kind' services or money to assist in varied school improvement projects.

Mann was the recipient of more such partnerships than any other school in the district. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that we didn't simply put our hand out seeking donations but instead insisted that the arrangements would be mutually beneficial. For instance, when Mesa Petroleum inquired about adopting Mann we explored opportunities for us to provide Mesa with a product or service before we agreed to be adopted. In the end, we supplied Mesa's lobby with attractive art displays featuring the works of our learners. In addition, our chorus performed at their Christmas program and at several other company

functions. Our attendance area might be full of impoverished homes but we had enough pride to avoid a one way transaction that would leave us as panhandlers.

We decided to become more involved in shaping the expectations of our future learners. The attendance award money was used to develop a recognition program in the elementary school that paralleled Mann's. In this manner we were orienting learners while helping their school recognize performance. There were many other projects we initiated in the elementary school, including a mentor program that drew attention to the type of role model we wanted to promote at Mann. These new "stars" of Mann reflected desired characteristics to our future learners at the elementary school.

By being the lone school to adopt another agency we distinguished ourselves and obtained valuable positive publicity that moved us closer to the acceptance of people outside of our school.

Another of our partnerships linked us with a restaurant near the school. They provided free lunches to learners recognized in one of our reward programs. In exchange, we provided the store with a functional product. They wanted something to occupy patrons as they waited for their food. We wanted to inform more and more people of what we were trying to do at Horace Mann. Therefore, our Art department

held a contest to design place mats that featured the Aim HIGH theme with the motif of the restaurant. The English department organized some word finds and cross word puzzles that focused on the 4 A's and related terms.

The place mat finalists were placed on display at the restaurant. By coincidence, a marketing representative of the restaurant chain was visiting the restaurant during this time and marveled at the art work. He phoned me and asked about buying a particular place mat design. I instructed him to negotiate with the individual artist. The two later agreed on a price and engaged in a growing work relationship whereby the artist performed contract work for the restaurant.

We did not want people to just show up at school and wait for something to be done to them. We challenged all members of the school community to come in every day and get involved!

Attitude was represented by expectations to be positive, act like a winner, give your best effort, and smile. I habitually exercised this behavior in hopes that modeling it would encourage others to exhibit similar actions. During the initial semester I was at Mann a local reporter prepared a story on the improvement within the school. Among the points he made in his article was a reference to the exchanges among staff and students. One

teacher admitted that she had previously been intimidated whenever any students were in close proximity to her but now she could practically feel the enthusiasm of the kids.

Another aspect of attitude was reflected in vandalism. After examining budgets from the last five years I determined that the school had averaged $3,600.00 per year in responding to acts of vandalism. I shared this data with the new superintendent and persuaded him to have the business office issue a check in that amount to the Mann Student Council.

I reasoned that the district annually expended that amount anyway so why not try something to deter the repeated costs. I assured him that any future vandalism costs would be extracted from the Student Council account. Year end costs exceeding $3,600. would be the responsibility of the Council and any savings from the $3,600. would be the Council's to keep. This placed the responsibility on student leaders and their constituents.

The Council leadership announced the proposal over the intercom. From now on the student body would bear the costs of any destructive acts committed in school. Any graffiti, broken toilets, and any other incident, would cost the kids. Any savings could be invested in something positive for the student body. At the conclusion of that first year the costs of vandalism was approximately $300.00. The Student Council

provided an interesting and constructive end of year ceremony and dance for the student body.

The most difficult action exercised in shaping attitude was the decision to extinguish negative behavior through a two pronged effort of identifying and responding to inappropriate behavior and visibly praising positive behaviors.

The first step required expelling about a dozen teenagers in the first month of school for possession of weapons and/or drugs. This action was not taken lightly. I understood what future awaited those expelled but my foremost priority was to insure a safe and orderly environment for those wishing to teach and learn at Horace Mann Junior High School. This hard line approach rattled the student body and sent a message throughout the school that such behaviors would no longer be tolerated or overlooked. It was made clear that there would be diligent pursuit of offending parties.

The second phase included frequent intercom announcements highlighting people in the school who were Aiming HIGH. These stories helped define the parameters of positive attitude by promoting specific actions displayed by the honoree. Gold Cards, inexpensive and small two inch by four inch brass plates inscribed with "Aim HIGH at Horace Mann," were distributed by the assistant principal to

learners who demonstrated positive behaviors. This program was also created to place the assistant principal in a position of positive interaction with the student body. Heretofore the assistant principal's role had been too often confined to discipline and the negative connotations emerging from being the "mean guy."

These Gold Cards entitled the recipient to bonuses without cost to the school for the duration of the week they received the card. For example, the holder of the card could; go immediately to the head of the lunch line, obtain free admission to any school athletic contest, dance, or event; and, a free lunch at one of the two area fast food franchises that had adopted the school.

One of the key ingredients to the recipe for changing the culture of the school fell on my shoulders. The student body and staff would notice any inconsistencies between what I said and what I did. Therefore, it was critical that I walk the talk. I had to accept responsibility for modeling expected behaviors.

After the first six week marking period, when the newspapers praised the improvement at the school, I sat down and personally wrote a letter to the parents of <u>every</u> staff member. I did this without the knowledge of the staff by obtaining the addresses of their parents through the

personnel office. If I expected them to positively reinforce learners then I should also positively reinforce them.

These letters informed the parents of the tremendous improvement at the school, specifically indicated how their son or daughter had contributed to the success, and thanked them for exercising parenting skills that would produce such a positive contributor to our school.

Within days I found individuals arriving in my office, some teary eyed, with gratitude for communicating the compliments to their parents. I also received letters written with great pride by many of the parents of staff members.

Following this effort, which consumed just one afternoon of my time, I was able to notice more pride in the staff as well as a considerable increase in written praise by staff members to deserving learners. To this day I still write to the parents of staff members, most notably when their son or daughter is awarded tenure.

The culture of the school was transformed by defining desired behaviors, modeling and reinforcing these behaviors, and promoting legends and heroes through stories, rites, and ceremonies that focused attention upon the 4 A's and supportive behaviors.

Achievement was defined as trying your best at all times, expecting (not hoping for) success, and Aiming HIGH.

Achievement had long been a source of shame and embarrassment for the students and staff. This painful experience was publicized by the local newspapers that presented district wide achievement data on each school. The standard measure was the percentage of learners who passed all of their classes. This criterion emerged out of the state's "No pass, No play" edict that required anyone failing even one class to be suspended from participating in any extra curricular school activity.

That's where the totem pole came into the school. The head custodian and I spent part of one Saturday painting wooden boxes. We had eight boxes, one for each of the eight junior high schools in the district. We painted each box the school colors of the corresponding school. We did not identify them by name. Then, in white paint, we painted the number indicating the percentage of learners at each school who passed all of their classes during the most recent six week marking period. For the first marking period that year we used figures from the end of the previous academic year.

Then we stacked the boxes on top of each other with the school with the lowest percentage (Mann) on the bottom. At the end of the last year Mann only had 52% of the student body passing all of their classes. As soon as we finished we placed the totem pole smack dab in the middle of the busiest

hallway intersection in the building, the front foyer and main hall. There would be no way that anyone would miss it.

That was it. No one else was informed of the significance of the totem pole. The structure even attracted the interest of the staff. Whenever anyone asked about it I casually informed them it would be revealed later in the week at the next academic pep assembly.

With an extremely competitive student body, you could imagine the feeling permeating the auditorium when the kids realized how they were at the bottom of all schools. I challenged them to put forth more effort at working more efficiently and effectively. The totem pole would remain there all year with updates after every six week marking period.

This precipitated a flurry of responses. Teachers created hallway bulletin board displays based around Aim High themes. There were hot air balloons lifting academic progress, rockets blasting off toward success, and other interesting exhibits.

Perhaps the most significant change induced by the challenge was adopted by the football coaches. The head coach went out on a limb, against accepted logic, and insisted that the team would skip a practice each week and head to the cafeteria after school and hit the books instead of the tackling dummies. He traded practices with study in

hopes that it would serve the team better if more of them remained academically eligible than if they perfected techniques but had the team decimated by poor grades.

I reinforced the coach. He knew that I played collegiate athletics and was an ardent supporter of sports. He also understood the bigger picture. I shared a copy of an article written by U.S. Senator Bill Bradley, himself a Rhodes scholar from Princeton and a valuable member of a championship NBA team. The piece was on the exploitation of athletes. The article emphasized that the odds of becoming a professional athlete were ten thousand to one. It's okay to dream, I reminded the athletes, but if you don't get an education as a safety net for your future you may end up being the star playing ball down at the park while waiting for your welfare check.

To illustrate the point I placed a maroon (our school color) toothpick among a stack of thousands of toothpicks and asked an athlete to pull out the maroon stick blindfolded. They laughed at first, before I finished the article with them. When they realized the odds against success they became much more attentive.

There was a nervous anxiety throughout the building on the eve of the paper's publication of the district wide results of the first marking period. We invited the superintendent to attend our academic pep rally the next day

when the figures were unveiled. The totem pole was placed on the stage. The anticipation was genuine. Without saying a word, the superintendent and I rearranged the boxes to demonstrate that we were not last anymore. At 64% we had surpassed one of the other junior high schools. The audience cheered. Many stood and applauded! Our work was far from finished, but confidence was climbing. We were Aiming HIGH.

The next marking period was met with 71% of the student body passing all of their classes. Another school was surpassed. At the end of the year we would be fourth among the eight schools. The progress was not lost on the media. Print and film reporters gravitated to the school to find the story behind the progress. As word spread so did pride among the staff and students. The media reports reinforced our efforts and prompted additional energy.

Suddenly, we were threatening the other schools in something more than sports. One school was insecure enough that the principal got on the intercom during morning announcements and made it a point to alert the students of that school that Mann was right behind them, as if we were the Mongols at the city gates!

The academic pep rallies were probably the most significant ceremony supporting our efforts to increase achievement. Whereas the athletic pep rally sought to excite the student body in support of the athletes (who represent

only a small portion of the student population and are only tangentially related to any appropriate mission for a school) we wanted to stimulate interest and commitment of our entire student body to a higher goal - learning.

These rallies, held at the conclusion of each semester, had the same level of enthusiasm found in the typical athletic rallies that occur at many secondary schools throughout the country. We had cheers and raps about the 4 A's. We had the pep band perform. We had vibrant speakers and important symbols.

The lamp of knowledge trophies that were exhibited in the display cases of the main lobby were available to any learner. In contrast to honor roll status that is realistically attainable by a small percentage of the learners these attendance, attitude, and achievement awards could be earned by anyone, regardless of IQ. The trophies were presented to deserving learners before the assembled student body after speeches given by successful and visible dignitaries who explained how they experienced success with the same attributes subsumed in our 4 A's.

We discovered that a local judge who graduated from Mann was the first African American in the history of Texas to be elected a county judge. He spoke about trying your best and expecting success. An employee from one of our adopt a school partners was an extraordinary and competitive

downhill skier who had her career interrupted by a ski injury that left her paralyzed. Instead of accepting this tragedy in defeat she overcame adversity and became a highly recognized and much decorated Special Olympics athlete. A hugely successful entrepreneur in the music industry, someone who owns 128 music stores and distributes books and music recordings to many large discount chains, spoke about what Aiming HIGH.

Achievement involved more than learner outcomes. I met with teachers as individuals, in clusters, as well as an entire faculty. Staff development was face to face in a number of different meetings and encouraged through more subtle acts like distributing articles on teacher expectations and student achievement. Terms such as wait time and cognitive dissonance were heard here and there in the hallways and lounge. The language of learning was essential to a culture of teaching and learning at Mann.

Acceptance by those outside of Mann had been elusive. The energy and effort expended in the past resembled the futility of a dog chasing it's own tail or a child trying to catch his/her shadow. Nonetheless, the goal of acceptance, the significance of which is mentioned in Abraham Maslow's work on the hierarchy of needs, remained the object of most everyone at Mann.

We would not be accepted by anyone until we were accepted by ourselves. We had to come to grips with who we were. Racially, the 587 learners were 43% Anglo, 31% African American, 23% Mexican American, and 3% Asian American. Financially, the learner population was over 75% free or reduced lunch. Instructionally, the staff was comprised either of people who harbored good intentions but were jousting at windmills and attempting to change the world, or people who had been assigned to Mann because they were not necessarily considered effective and were placed there because an apathetic parent community would not know the difference.

None of us, including me, (I would later find out that the interim superintendent had assigned me to Mann because he detested "the Yankee" and hoped I would be swallowed up by the vast maladies facing the school) appeared confident of ourselves or secure with who we were.

This acknowledgment of perceived deficiencies and concomitant sense of urgency provided the essential drive for acceptance. This would be the leverage to lift us in our efforts. It was my responsibility to exercise the two major challenges of a leader, articulating a vision of a better future in ways that would be inviting, inspiring, believable and attainable, and facilitating the pursuit of the vision.

I began with the aforementioned speech on the first day of school that disclosed my own background and hopes. I then had the first six weeks of school to establish a platform for success. That was the period of time before the report card marks came out and served as the measuring stick used by the two local newspapers to determine the layperson's perception of school performance. The future hinged upon our ability to demonstrate success in six weeks. Anything short of improvement would dilute the motivating activities developed to urge the staff and learners onward. I didn't really know whether the sand castle I helping to construct was beyond the reaches of the waves signaling a rising tide.

I recognized anyone who approximated desired behaviors and encouraged others to express their appreciation for people doing the right thing. I put in as many hours and as much sweat as possible, attempting to be everywhere and everything. It was difficult work.

The newspaper headlines that first six weeks proclaimed improvement. We were headed in the right direction. Our hard work was being recognized. We made progress and now felt capable of even more.

Shortly after that first six week marking period there was a district wide staff development day set aside for the eight junior high schools. The objective of that day was to become involved in a plan to convert to middle schools. I

had planned something in preparation for the first opportunity for our staff to interact with their colleagues following the announcement of academic improvement.

I took the staff roster and went to a local printing company. I had letterhead and business cards made up for each staff member. These items were practical because our staff, be they teachers who meet with parents,… or custodians who meet with supply salesmen,… have a need to exchange information via personalized school stationery. Another benefit was promoting a sense of pride in who we are.

It worked! During that staff development day our teachers proudly distributed business cards to their colleagues as a means of encouraging communication within the district. The looks on the faces of those handing out the cards and those receiving the cards spoke volumes. Teachers appeared unashamed to show they taught at Mann. The recipients appeared both puzzled and envious. Before the day was concluded I was contacted by two junior high principals who wanted to know where I got the business cards printed.

To meet with success we realized that we had to take an alternative road. We had been stuck behind all the other schools like a car stuck behind slow moving tractor trailers on winding, hilly country roads lacking a passing lane. We

were so far behind that we would never get ahead by doing what everyone else was doing.

On the evening of Open House something happened that would not have been better if it had been purposely orchestrated. Not only did the school enjoy a greater turn out of parents than it had in memory, but the parents assembled in the auditorium reacted with a standing ovation after the introduction of the staff.

Copies of encouraging news articles on the school began cropping up everywhere in the school, around the staff lounge, the copy machine, bulletin boards, and the main foyer. It was like a snowball gathering mass as it descended a hill.

I spoke at local, regional, state, and national venues and shared with pride the work at Horace Mann. We had regular visits by contingents representing schools in and out of Texas who had heard of Mann and desired more information.

Before the end of the first year we were receiving inquiries from parents of children in other schools who wanted information on transferring to Mann. Teachers no longer requested transfers out of Mann. Instead, as the district approached the move toward middle schools that would change from a grades 7,8,9 configuration to a 6,7,8

format we had transfer requests from 6th grade teachers who wanted to come to Mann.

One aspect of the conversion of junior high schools to middle schools was captured in the surveys that the district's central office anonymously administered to parents, learners, and staff throughout the city. These instruments were designed to obtain feedback on what people thought about their junior high school in an effort to create baseline data in the form of a pre-test and post-test with respect to what they felt about middle schools after the following year.

The results, published throughout the school district, provided convincing evidence that Mann was held in much higher esteem by it's parents, staff, and learners than any other school was by their similar constituencies.[63]

When everything was done, we had a school we would want to attend if we were teenagers, a school we would want to have our own children attend, and a school where we were proud to work. Most of all, we had a "school of hope."

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